

Utilitarianism of J.S. Mill

John Stuart Mill is known for championing individual rights and personal freedom, and advocated emancipation of women and proportional representation. His most famous work, *On Liberty* (1859), is thought by many to be the definitive defense of freedom of thought and discussion. In ethics, Mill was a utilitarian. He published his *Utilitarianism* in 1863.

Mill was a Hedonist. According to him, “The creed which accepts... the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By ‘happiness’ is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by ‘unhappiness’, pain, and the privation of pleasure. Pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and all desirable things are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.”¹ Mill uses ‘pleasure’ and ‘happiness’ as synonymous. He does not distinguish them from each other. He regards virtue, health, love of honour and the like as means to happiness. He does not regard them as intrinsic values.

Mill gives a hedonistic criterion of right and wrong. **An action is right if it yields pleasure or excess of pleasure over pain. An action is wrong if it gives pain or excess of pain over pleasure.** This is hedonism pure and simple. Rightness consists in conduciveness to pleasure. Wrongness consists in conduciveness to pain.

J.S. Mill’s Hedonism is also Psychological Hedonism. He offers the following proof of Psychological Hedonism. “Desiring a thing and finding it pleasant are, in strictness of language, two modes of naming the same psychological fact; **to think of an object as desirable, and to think of it as pleasant are one and same thing**; and to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it as pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.”² In plain language, it means that **we always desire what is pleasant, and that therefore we desire pleasure.**

J.S. Mill is an advocate of Ethical Hedonism. He says, “The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to the end.”³ His Ethical Hedonism is based upon Psychological Hedonism. He offers the following proof Ethical Hedonism. We always desire pleasure; therefore pleasure is desirable. He says, “The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it, the sole evidence that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.”⁴ All persons desire pleasure; so pleasure is desirable.

¹J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ch. II.

²*Ibid.* 41-42.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

J.S. Mill recognizes the kinds of pleasure or the qualitative difference of pleasures. Mill, for the first time, introduces the distinction of quality. Epicurus emphasized the distinction between the pleasures of our body and those of the mind and gave superiority to the latter on account of their greater durability and their comparative freedom from painful consequences. But he did not recognize the qualitative superiority of the mental pleasures. To Bentham also all pleasures in kind are the same. Though Bentham recognizes purity of pleasure, he does not mean by it qualitative superiority, but freedom from pain. J.S. Mill for the first time, holds that the distinction of quality is independent of quantity, and that the qualitative distinction is as real as the quantitative. He says, "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone."⁵ Hence, J.S. Mill's doctrine is called Refined Utilitarianism as contrasted with Bentham's Gross Utilitarianism. Sometime Mill's doctrine is called Qualitative Utilitarianism as distinguished from Bentham's Quantitative Utilitarianism.

What, then, according to J.S. Mill, is the test of quality? He appeals to the verdict of competent judges. "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of and feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the desirable pleasure... Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasure."⁶ Competent judges always prefer intellectual pleasures to bodily and sensual pleasures. From this verdict of competent judges there can be no appeal. If there is a conflict of opinion among the competent judges, we should abide by the verdict of the majority of them. J.S. Mill says, "From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal... If they differ that of the majority among them, must be admitted to the final."⁷

When J.S. Mill is pressed hard to give the ultimate reason of preference felt by the competent judges, he refers us to the "sense of dignity" which is natural to man. It is an account of its existence that no man would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals capable of sensual pleasures alone. J.S. Mill says, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied". And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

only know their own side of the question: “The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”⁸

J.S. Mill’s Hedonism is also altruistic. Bentham also advocated Altruistic Hedonism, but did not offer any argument for his altruism. J.S. Mill advocates refined utilitarianism and offers a few arguments. He says, “The utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, the utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as, one would be done by, and to love one’s neighbour as yourself constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.”⁹

J.S. Mill offers the following logical argument for altruism. He says, “No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. Each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.”¹⁰ A’s happiness is a good to A. B’s happiness is a good to B. C’s happiness is a good to C. Therefore A’s happiness and B’s happiness and C’s happiness are a good to A+B+C i.e., aggregate of all persons. Therefore general happiness is a good to all.

J.S. Mill offers a psychological explanation of the transition from egoism to altruism. Altruism grows out of egoism - sympathy or fellow-feeling, out of self-love in the life time of an individual according to the laws of association and transference of interest from the end to the means. At first we were egoists and relieved the miseries of others in order to relieve our own pain. Then by repetition our own interest was transferred from the end to the means; we forgot our own pleasure, and came to take delight in relieving the miseries of others, and acquired sympathy. Thus sympathy is acquired by the individual in his own life time.

J.S. Mill assumes that there are two kinds of sanctions for altruistic conduct, external and internal. Mill accounts for moral obligation to pursue general happiness by the external sanctions and the internal sanction of conscience. An appeal to the external sanctions means ultimately an appeal to the self-interest of the individual. Therefore Mill adds to these external sanctions the internal sanction of conscience. It is sympathy, fellow-feeling, social feeling of mankind, a feeling for the happiness of mankind, a desire to be in unity with out fellow creatures. J.S. Mill says, “The internal sanction of duty is a feeling in our own mind, a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty. This feeling when disinterested, and connecting itself with the pure idea of duty, is the essence of conscience.”¹¹

J.S. Mill’s Refined Utilitarianism is open to the following objections:

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid*, Ch. IV.

¹¹*Ibid*, Ch. III.

(1) J.S. Mill's doctrine is Hedonistic. So it is open to all the objections against Hedonism. Hedonism is based upon a one-sided view of human nature. It considers man as essentially a sentient being. Therefore, it conceives the end of his life as sentient satisfaction or pleasure. But the true end of life must be the satisfaction of the complete total self, rational as well as sentient. Moreover, happiness is not the same thing as pleasures. Dewey rightly remarks that happiness is a feeling of the whole self, as opposed to pleasure, a feeling of some one aspect of self; that happiness is permanent, as opposed to pleasure which is temporary and related to a particular activity.¹² Happiness lies in the harmony of pleasures while pleasure arises from the gratification of a single isolated desire. Happiness is the feeling that accompanies the systematization of desires. Pleasure is the feeling that arises from the fulfillment of a single desire. Bentham and J.S. Mill fail to recognize this obvious distinction between pleasure and happiness.

(2) J.S. Mill bases his Utilitarianism on Psychological Hedonism. So his doctrine suffers from all the defects of Psychological Hedonism. Pleasure is not the direct object of desire, but the consequence of the fulfillment of desire. The more we seek pleasure, the less we get it. This is the paradox of hedonism. J.S. Mill's admission, that virtue, wealth and the like are desired as means to pleasure, in the beginning, and then, in the long run, are desired in themselves owing to the transference of interest from the end to the means, is fatal to psychological hedonism. J.S. Mill, then, admits that desire is directed to objects other than pleasure. But Psychological hedonism insists that desire is always directed towards pleasure. Moreover, even if we do desire pleasure, it does not prove that pleasure is desirable. Psychological Hedonism does not necessarily lead to Ethical Hedonism.

(3) J.S. Mill offers the following proof of Ethical Hedonism. An object is visible if people actually see it. An object is audible if people actually hear it. Likewise, an object is desirable, if people actually desire it. In fact, we actually desire pleasure; therefore, pleasure is desirable. Here, J.S. Mill commits the fallacy of figure of speech. He confounds the word 'desirable' with the words 'capable of being desired'. But that is desirable, which ought to be desired, not that which is capable of being desired. The 'desirable' is not the normal object of desire, but the proper or reasonable object of desire. What is capable of being seen is visible. What is capable of being heard is audible. But what is capable of being desired is desirable. What ought to be desired is desirable. Stealing one's neighbour's wealth is desired by one. But is it not desirable for the person. What is desired is indeed, capable of being desired. But that does not make it desirable. Mere examination of what men do desire does not tell us what is desirable. We can say what is desirable only after a critical examination of the reasonableness of things desired. Just as the detestable means what ought to be detested, and not what can be detested, and the damnable, what deserves to be damned, so the desirable means what *ought* to be desired or deserves to be desired. It does not mean 'able to be desired', as visible means 'able to be seen.'¹³

¹²Dewey, *Psychology*, 239.

¹³Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 67.

(4) J.S. Mill recognizes a distinction of quality in pleasures, in addition to their quantity. The pleasures of the higher faculties are intrinsically superior to those derived from the sense. The quality of pleasures, therefore, is derived from the higher nature of man.¹⁴

The quality of pleasure is no other than the moral quality in disguise. Those pleasures are qualitatively superior which are approved by reason or higher moral nature. But this admission amounts to an abandonment of the hedonistic position. Mill introduces an element of rationalism into his doctrine by recognizing the qualitative distinction of pleasures. J.S. Mill says, "Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool no instructed person would be an ignoramus."¹⁵ He admits therefore that men sometimes desire something other than pleasure. What makes them think the pleasures of the intellectual superior to those of a beast is not their intensity as pleasures but their superior nobleness or moral elevation. If some pleasures are preferable to others on account of their quality as distinct from their quantity or intensity, then the Hedonistic theory is abandoned because something other than pleasure in all its degrees of intensity and duration is preferred. Thus quality being an extra-hedonistic criterion undermines hedonism and introduces rationalism into it. Moreover, J.S. Mill's recognition of quality of pleasures undermines his psychological hedonism. If we desire a superior quality in pleasure, we do not desire pleasure. Rashdall rightly observes that a desire for superior quality of pleasure is not really a desire for pleasure.

(5) What is the test of quality? When J.S. Mill appeals to the verdict of competent judges to explain the test of quality, he makes it an arbitrary affair. If the verdict be not arbitrary, it must commend itself to reason. Thus the outer verdict of competent judges is but an echo of the inner voice of conscience. Moral reasons determine the moral quality of pleasures.

When pressed hard to give a real test of quality, J.S. Mill refers us to the sense of dignity. Is it the dignity of sense or the dignity of reason? It cannot be resolved into desire for pleasure. The sense of dignity natural to man is the dignity of reason. It is not the dignity of sensibility. The sense of dignity is not, as T.H. Green rightly remarks, a desire for pleasure. The sense of dignity natural to man is the dignity of reason, not of sensibility. Here, again, J.S. Mill introduces an element of rationalism into his doctrine.

(6) J.S. Mill's Hedonism is altruistic. He offers the following logical argument for it. He says, "Each person's happiness is a good to him. Therefore, the general happiness is good to the aggregate of all persons."¹⁶ And because general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons, it is a good to each person. Here Mill commits two fallacies, viz., the fallacy of composition and the fallacy of division.

¹⁴ Seth *Ethical Principles*, 125.

¹⁵ J.S. Mill, *op. cit.*, Ch. II.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Ch. IV.

There are two arguments here- (1) Each person's happiness is good to him. Therefore the general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons. A's happiness is good to A. B's happiness is a good to B. C's happiness is a good to C. Therefore A's happiness and B's happiness and C's happiness are a good to A+B+C. This argument involves the fallacy of composition. Here we pass from the distributive to the collective use of a term. The aggregate of pleasures is not pleasure. The aggregate of persons is no person. Pleasures cannot be added to one another. The minds of persons also cannot be rolled into one and made into an aggregate. (2) The general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons. Therefore, the general happiness is a good to each person. This argument involves the fallacy of division. It is not explicitly stated by J.S. Mill. Here we pass from the collective to the distributive use of a term.

(7) Hedonism consistently carried out cannot account for altruism. There is no earthly reason from the hedonistic standpoint why an individual should forego his own pleasure for the sake of others. If by seeking the pleasure of others we do not seek our own pleasure, then we are not Hedonists. Hedonism consistently carried out, must be egoistic. Martineau says rightly, "There is no road from *each* for himself to *each* for *all*."¹⁷ Mill is an advocate of psychological hedonism. According to him, we always desire pleasure. If so, we always desire our own pleasure. We cannot desire anybody else's pleasure, because we do not feel it as our own pleasure. Hence psychological hedonism is inconsistent with altruistic hedonism.

(8) Sympathy or fellow-feeling which is purely an altruistic feeling can never be derived from pure egoism or self-love. What the laws of transference of interest and association can do is to convert egoism to ego-altruism, but not to pure altruism. There are egoistic instincts as well as altruistic instincts in human nature. There are self-preserving instincts as well as race-preserving instincts even in lower animals, far less in men. The mother courts danger and death for the good of her infant. In the developed human beings egoism has evolved out of self-preserving instincts of animals, and altruism out of their race-preserving instincts. Men and animals have always had both self-preserving and race-preserving instincts.¹⁸ Hence it is absurd to hold that altruism is developed out of egoism in the life time of the individual under the influence of psychological laws.

(9) J.S. Mill cannot offer a reasonable explanation of moral obligation or sense of duty. The external sanctions cannot account for the sense of duty or *oughtness*; they can create a *must* but never an *ought*. They can account for physical compulsion, but not for moral obligation. Mill adds to these external sanctions the internal sanction of conscience, he undermines his own hedonistic position and introduces an element of rationalism into his doctrine. The internal sanction, according to Mill, is the subjective feeling of 'sympathy', 'fellow-feeling', or 'feeling of unit with mankind'. But the merely subjective feeling cannot be the source of moral obligation. It cannot be the source of the sense of moral authority. Sometimes Mill speaks of the internal sanction

¹⁷Martineau, *Types of Ethical Theory*.

¹⁸Rashdall. Ch. III.

as “the feeling of pain attendant on the violation of duty.”¹⁹ This feeling of pain or remorse is the consequence of the violation of duty. The violation of duty is the infringement of the moral law of reason. Therefore, Mill covertly appeals to reason as the moral authority and introduces rationalism into his doctrine. The internal sanction is the authority of reason, not of the feeling of pleasure or pain.

(10) J.S. Mill makes the hedonistic calculus extremely impracticable. Subjective pleasures and pains which are highly variable and capricious cannot be exactly estimated. It is all the more difficult to apply the hedonistic calculus to “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. Bentham admits that every man is nearer to himself than he can be to any other man, and that no other man can weigh for him his pleasures and pains. If so, we cannot calculate the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Then, again, what is pleasant to me, may be painful to another, and what makes us happy at one time makes us unhappy at another time.

Hence hedonistic calculus is impracticable. And the difficulty of hedonistic calculation is all the more increased by Mill’s introduction of the differences of quality among pleasures. We cannot set a *plus* of quality or quantity against *minus* of quality or quantity. Qualities cannot be measured against quantities, unless they are somehow reducible to quantities. But Mill does not admit that qualities can be reduced to quantities. They are entirely different from each other, and cannot be reduced to the same units. Thus Mill’s recognition of qualities of pleasure makes hedonistic calculus extremely impracticable. Pleasures and pains are viewed by Mill as a kind of emotional currency, which can be added, subtracted, and multiplied. But this is wrong.

J.S. Mill and others did inestimable service to legal and political reforms at the time by laying stress on the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But how far they were inspired by the hedonistic element in their theory, and how far by the democratic element in their theory, cannot be rightly ascertained. Mill and others effected great reforms in the interest of social justice. The slogans of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ and ‘each to count for one and none for more than one’ helped them in reforming established social abuses. But the Utilitarians identified social progress too much with material and bodily comforts. They identified happiness with material happiness. They put insufficient emphasis on the intellectual, aesthetic and religious values, the intrinsic worth of character, love, friendship, and the like goods. They neglected the higher cultural interests. Economic goods occupied too much of their thought and attention.²⁰ Human good comprises economic goods-- wealth and happiness. But it includes knowledge and virtue as well.

¹⁹ J.S. Mill, *op. cit.*, Ch. III.

²⁰ Mackenzie, Bk. II Ch. IV; Rashdall, Vol. I, Bk. I; Ch II & III, Bk. II, Ch. VIII.